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ABSTRACT

Because the primary years are the point where specific changes are required in teaching practice and school organization, a task force examined Kentucky's primary program through school visits, interviews, expert testimony, and research. The last three years have shown marked improvement in student performance in the basics (reading, writing, and mathematics). There is a challenge to teach both these basic skills and higher subject matter content. The task force's recommendation is that the General Assembly retain the primary program, with the flexibility for school implementation adopted in 1994, and encourage schools, districts, local boards, and school councils to focus on implementing the program fully and well. To improve Kentucky's primary schools, it is more important to confront implementation problems than to change Kentucky statute. Recommendations for implementation include: (1) increasing efforts to improve leadership skills of principals and administrators; (2) concentrating on actual classroom practice, including training in the use of Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP); (3) distributing good, usable materials to teachers; (4) disseminating primary configuration maps to school councils, teachers, and administrators; (5) stressing professional development in the use of technology; (6) facilitating communication between parents and schools; (7) clarifying requirements for multi-age grouping; (8) increasing training of elementary school teachers in score writing and mathematics portfolios; (9) disseminating information to teachers about flexibility for grouping kindergarten students; and (10) insuring that basics, as well as subject matter and skills beyond the basics, are taught well. (Contains 22 references.) (BGC)

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The Primary Program

Report from the Task Force on Improving Kentucky Schools

The Prichard Committee for Academic Excellence

September, 1995

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The Primary Program

Report from the Task Force on Improving Kentucky Schools

The Task Force has examined the primary program extensively through school visits; interviews with students, teachers, administrators, and parents; testimony of experts in early childhood education, and research on this subject.

We are grateful to our consultants: Dr. Connie Bridge, director, Institute on Education Reform, University of Kentucky; Dr. Ric Hovda, professor, University of Louisville; Dr. Lilian Katz, professor, University of Illinois, and director, ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education; Dr. Ellen McIntyre, associate professor, University of Louisville, and Dr. Peter Winograd, associate director, Institute on Education Reform, University of Kentucky.

We would also like to thank those who spoke to our Task Force and provided information from their own experience. These included: Carol Greenlee, primary teacher, Lansdowne Elementary School, Lexington; Bev Wells, primary teacher, Squires Elementary School, Lexington, and Kentucky Distinguished Educator; Robert Blair, principal, and Joyce Dotson, teacher, Southside Elementary School, Shelbyville, and the many teachers at Southside Elementary School who graciously invited us into their classrooms and responded to our questions.

Background

The driving idea behind Kentucky's school policy is to encourage deep changes in the way children are taught so that all children will learn at higher levels. The primary years are the point, under KRS 156.160, where specific changes are required in teaching practice and school organization. The general goal is to tailor instruction to meet the needs of individual

children instead of assuming that all young children are exactly alike. Multi-age settings offer the flexibility needed to accommodate a wide range of differences in children (Elkind).

The required components of the primary program include instructional practices that are appropriate for young children's developmental levels; classrooms that include children of different ages and ability levels; individualized instructional practices that enable children to progress at their own rate; assessment of students based on demonstrations of their ability; reporting methods that are more descriptive than a single letter grade; professional teamwork, and positive parent involvement. Each of these components are overlapping and depend on one another for success.

There has been strong improvement in student performance in the basics (reading, writing, and mathematics) over the last three years. There has also been stronger improvement in assessment scores at the elementary school level than at other levels.

Several studies of the primary program show that teachers spend the largest part of the school day on reading, writing, and mathematics (Bridge, 1994; Raths & Fanning, 1993), the traditional basics. Furthermore, instruction in these areas is judged by researchers to be of high quality (Bridge, 1994; Kyle & McIntyre, 1995). The additional challenge for teachers, however, is to teach (and be accountable for) both basic skills and much higher subject matter content than ever expected before.

Researchers also say that the nature and quality of primary program implementation varies greatly from teacher to teacher and school to school (Bridge, 1994; Appalachian Educational Laboratories, 1993). But research also shows that many teachers have worked diligently to understand, plan, and implement new practices (Bridge, 1994; Kyle & McIntyre,

1995).

Implementation of such a complex set of new practices is difficult for teachers. Some have mastered new instructional approaches; others have not. It is not to be expected that the primary program will be fully implemented in all schools in three or four years. Teachers need time to learn and use different instructional techniques. "It takes a long time," says Lilian Katz, professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois and the director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education, "for teachers to change old habits." Treating each child alike is an old habit; designing instruction so each child will learn is the new practice.

The changes created by the primary program are substantial and difficult. They have resulted in confusion and frustration by teachers and parents. For good reason, the primary program needs special attention.

Recommendation

- We recommend that the General Assembly retain the primary program, with the flexibility for school implementation adopted in 1994, and encourage schools, districts, local boards, and school councils to focus on implementing the program fully and well.

Rationale

On balance, there is clear evidence of progress in primary implementation despite much variation from school to school and several implementation difficulties (Bridge, 1994). There is also research evidence that primary school children are improving their basic skills (Bridge, 1994; Hovda, et.al., 1995; McIntyre, 1995; McIntyre, et.al, in press; Wells, in press),

and no known research evidence to the contrary. Experience with nongraded programs in other states shows consistent positive findings (Gutierrez & Slavin). The results for students include improvement in reading, writing, mathematics, and social skills (Paven 1993; Tanner & Decotis); better listening/speaking skills, writing skills, mathematics problem-solving skills, and citizenship (Tanner & Decotis); improved attitudes toward school (Paven 1992), and success in meeting students' needs (Anderson). A few early Kentucky studies are reporting children more actively involved with their own education, having more positive attitudes toward school, and higher attendance rates (Raths & Fanning, 1993; Oakes & Mann, in progress).

National and state polls show that parents and the public believe that children are not mastering basic knowledge. This concern has been present across America and Kentucky for a generation. Since the early 1980s, when reform efforts began, increasing basic knowledge and going beyond basic learning have been the goals of the school reform movement. It was to correct this deficiency that the Kentucky Education Reform Act was passed. No known research has shown, however, that basic skill learning has declined as a result of the primary program. "It is a myth," says one researcher, "that primary is hostile to basic skills."

While constant scrutiny must be applied to the effect of primary school instruction, particularly in basic skills, we see no reason at this time to alter Kentucky statutes regarding primary school. Great statutory flexibility already exists, providing leeway for schools to make their own decisions on grouping students. This flexibility, in effect, allows schools to use multi-age groups only a few minutes each day if teachers so choose.

In short, without research supporting a contrary view, we believe that legislative action

weakening the primary program before it is fully implemented would have to be based on political, not educational, grounds.

Implementation

To improve student learning in primary schools, it is much more important to confront problems in primary implementation than to change Kentucky statute.

Good implementation requires leadership, professional development, and time. All are in short supply. Research in 1994 (The Implementation of Kentucky's Primary Program, directed by Connie Bridge at the Institute on Education Reform, University of Kentucky) identified the following issues:

- The extent of implementation of the primary program remains mostly dependent on individual teachers in charge of individual classrooms. Observers found wide variations in practice among teachers within most schools visited.
- In about one-half of the classrooms observed, instructional activities appeared to be related to Kentucky's Learning Goals and Academic Expectations. In the other half of the classrooms, observed activities appeared to have little or no direct relationship to the Learning Goals.
- Progress toward implementation varies widely among the 31 program components. Some have been implemented extensively across the state; others have not. Key components that have been implemented in two-thirds or more of classrooms include:
    - Arranging a flexible physical learning environment.
    - Creating a warm and supportive social emotional climate.
    - Utilizing recommended best practices in the instruction of reading, writing,

and mathematics.

- Collaborating with other regular classroom teachers in planning and implementing instruction.
- Communicating with parents about the primary program and helping parents to support instruction at home.

Key program components that are still not being implemented in 40 percent or more of the classrooms include:

- Designing and establishing a variety of learning centers.
- Creating broad-based theme centered units.
- Utilizing recommended practices in the instruction of science, social studies, and the arts.
- Implementing a variety of performance and authentic assessment practices on a regular basis.
- Collaborating or planning with special education teachers or other specialists.
- Scheduling regular collaborative planning periods with other teachers.
- Involving parents in meaningful classroom activities.

- Three out of four schools are meeting the multi-age instruction requirement.
- Although kindergarten (5-year-old) children are included in the primary program, the duration and frequency of their inclusion varies widely.
- Four out of five teachers reported that special needs children (children with physical or mental handicapping conditions or learning disabilities) are included in

their classrooms and that the predominate practice was to include these children in all instructional activities.

- Teachers report limited planning time. Less than one-third reported joint planning time with other teachers during the school day. Another third reported only occasional joint planning time with other teachers.
- Primary program teachers in 1994-95 showed marked progress in the implementation of key program components as compared with 1993-94. Even though teachers in the 1993 study were picked by principals as progressive teachers and the teachers observed in the 1994 study were selected at random, the data shows an increase in (a) integrated teaching and learning, (b) cooperative planning with other teachers, (c) the use of authentic assessment to measure learning, (d) qualitative reporting to parents, and (e) meaningful parent involvement in classroom activities.
- When asked to rate sources of support for implementation of the primary program, teachers rated support from their principals and from other classroom teachers higher than support from external sources, such as universities, local cooperatives, the Kentucky Department of Education, and Regional Service Centers.

This study offers important recommendations with which we concur. They can be found in Appendix I of this report.

We offer the following recommendations regarding the implementation of the primary program:

School Leadership

- We recommend that new efforts be made to improve the leadership skills of

principals and administrators. School boards should establish performance standards for school administrators and see that they are met. Principal training should be expanded. [See also recommendations on Professional Development.]

Rationale

Teachers say that school leadership is the most important ingredient for the successful implementation of new programs (McIntyre & Kyle, in press; Kyle & McIntyre, 1995; Raths & Fanning, 1993; Raths, Katz & Fanning, 1992). Effective administrators have taken a strong role in identifying school needs, analyzing test data, securing good professional development for teachers, creatively arranging schedules, and providing support, encouragement, and resources. Training and support for administrators is a critical component to full implementation of the primary program.

Professional Development

- We recommend that the Kentucky Department of Education, the Regional Service Centers, colleges and universities, local boards of education, and local school councils provide training and time for teachers that concentrate on actual classroom practice. Teachers need training in the use of the Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP) or other methods that provide teachers the means to follow the progress of each child in acquiring necessary skills and to identify children with special learning needs.
- We recommend that local school boards, administrators, and school councils find creative ways to provide time for teachers to learn about the primary program and to plan and prepare for teaching in primary classrooms. Examples of schools and districts that have restructured their schedules to provide teachers with more time for

professional development and planning should be circulated widely. (See the report of the Prichard Committee Task Force on Restructuring Time and Learning.)

- We recommend that good, useable materials, which have already been published, be more widely distributed to teachers. Model curriculum units, such as those developed by the University of Kentucky, should be made available. Regional Service Centers should identify such units created in Kentucky classrooms and distribute them. The Department of Education should make "Different Ways of Knowing" (DWoK) curricula affordable to more Kentucky teachers.
- We recommend that the primary configuration maps, which were developed by researchers at the University of Kentucky and describe full implementation of the primary program, be shared widely with elementary school councils, teachers and administrators, for use in understanding and comparing their progress in implementing the primary program.
- We recommend that school councils and school boards seek professional development for teachers in the use of technology to reduce the amount of time and paperwork required by the new reporting methods.

Rationale

Changing teaching practice in primary schools requires vast amounts of professional development. Despite substantial resources for such training, the need is not being adequately met. Teachers need more time, good useable materials, and examples of best practices to restructure classrooms. They also need technology and the skills to use it to do their work more efficiently. Elsewhere in the full report of the Task Force, we make extensive

recommendations for professional development.

Parent Involvement

- We recommend that schools commit fully to the principle that good communication with parents and effective encouragement of parent involvement is a high priority for the school and for teachers. Having a school council is not, in our view, sufficient alone for engaging parents as much as needed.
- We recommend that a "Checklist for Parents" be developed by the Kentucky Department of Education and distributed to all parents to provide them with an understanding of what a good primary program should look like, including ways to determine whether their children are acquiring reading, writing, and mathematics skills.
- We recommend that the Kentucky Department of Education and Regional Service Centers create sample report cards for use or adaptation that are clear in pointing out skills that have been traditionally considered "basic skills." Parents should be included in the process of developing these sample report cards. The use of the Kentucky Early Learning Profile (KELP) can be helpful here.
- We recommend that school boards and school councils use time more effectively and creatively to create better opportunities for parent/teacher conferences and other ways to communicate with parents. Examples, such as Jefferson County's two parent/teacher conference days, should be widely distributed. [See recommendations of the Prichard Committee Task Force on Restructuring Time and Learning.]
- We recommend that effective school communication with parents about student

progress in their academic work be a top school priority. Parents need explanations from teachers about new grading procedures; teachers should provide that explanation so that grading is absolutely clear to parents.

- We recommend that schools improve and expand communication between teachers and parents. (One model is the Prichard Committee's Parents and Teachers Talking Together.)

Rationale

Research on primary program implementation shows that positive parent involvement has been slowly and poorly implemented by schools. Parent involvement is a key factor in school success for children, and every effort must be made to bring parents into the process.

Multi-age Grouping

- We recommend that the Department of Education, the Regional Service Centers, and local administrators make requirements absolutely clear to teachers and parents: the law provides flexibility in grouping students—grouping students of two age levels is appropriate, legal, and perhaps more practical, for some schools and classrooms. However, teachers interested in implementing classrooms with more than two age levels should be encouraged to do so and be supported in their efforts.
- We recommend that professional development programs emphasize helping teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement continuous progress in their classrooms. The Kentucky Early Learning Profile is a useful tool for accomplishing this.
- We recommend that school boards and councils make full-time aides available to every primary classroom.

Rationale

Multi-age grouping is both one of the more difficult components of the primary program for teachers to implement, and one of the most controversial, difficult, and confusing aspects of primary school for parents (Jacovino, in press; Bass, Bibee & Heidelberg, in press).

It is well established that allowing children to learn at their own rate is good teaching practice. Allowing some children with gifts or talents to move forward quickly as they master material, while not penalizing children if they need more time, is the best way of teaching young children. (In the primary program, this is called "continuous progress.")

Multi-age grouping requires teachers to understand each student's learning level so that, in a multi-age group, the teacher can help each child progress at his or her own rate. Such thinking about learning levels that goes beyond age and grade level is possible, but not likely, in single-age groups. It is more likely that teachers will teach to the middle of the class in a single-age classroom.

Because implementing the primary program is so difficult, teachers need assistance. Full-time aides can provide the help that teachers need in the classroom.

Transition to Grade Four

- We recommend that teachers in the primary programs and in the upper elementary grades work together to establish mutual academic expectations for students and for what is expected in the fourth grade KIRIS assessments.
- We recommend that all elementary school teachers, not just fourth and fifth grade teachers, be trained in and score writing and mathematics portfolios so that each teacher understands the standards set for student success.

- We recommend that communication with and training for teachers emphasize that all primary teachers are responsible for student achievement, not just fourth grade teachers.

Rationale

Student assessment scores demonstrate that fourth grade students are making good improvement in reading, writing, and mathematics. However, some fourth grade teachers report that students entering their classrooms have not been adequately prepared for fourth grade work and for the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS) assessments. Communication among colleagues about common expectations for students, and a feeling of joint responsibility for every student's learning is central to success for students.

Kindergarten Inclusion

- We recommend that the Department of Education and Regional Service Centers aggressively disseminate information to teachers about flexibility for grouping kindergarten students. However, schools should be encouraged to include 5-year-old students in meaningful activities with older students to increase the benefit to both groups of students.

Rationale

Many parents and teachers have expressed concern about the inclusion of 5-year-old children with older elementary children. The difficulties of grouping half-day kindergarten students with full-day students are also apparent. However, researchers report that kindergarten students can be successfully included in the primary program (McIntyre, in press) and a study in one school district demonstrated that when 5-year-olds were included in

a well-implemented program, those children were better prepared for higher level work than kindergarten students who were isolated in a kindergarten classroom (Compton-Hall, Jukes & Newsome, 1994). There is wide latitude in grouping kindergarten students under the current law, so we see no need to change the statutes.

Teaching the Basics

The intention of the entire reform, including changes in the primary school, is to insure that basics, as well as subject matter and skills that go beyond the basics, are taught well for all children. Kentucky law is quite clear; it establishes that schools "shall develop their students' ability to:

1. Use basic communication and mathematics skills for purposes and situations they will encounter throughout their lives;
2. Apply core concepts and principles from mathematics, the sciences, the arts, the humanities, social studies, and practical living studies to situations they will encounter throughout their lives;
3. Become a self-sufficient individual;
4. Become responsible members of a family, work group, or community, including demonstrating effectiveness in community service;
5. Think and solve problems in school situations and in a variety of situations they will encounter in life, and
6. Connect and integrate experiences and new knowledge from all subject matter fields with what they have previously learned and build on past learning experiences to acquire new information

through various media sources." (KRS 158.6451)

Because teachers have so much to do, the quality of teaching basic instruction should be monitored closely. One superintendent has argued that there is a tendency on the part of teachers to go to extremes. "It's like the swinging of a pendulum. For many years they've been teaching too much in a standardized and rote method, with no attention to individual children's differences, and they've been missing many children. Now, under the new primary program, the pendulum can swing in the other direction, and some teachers may go too far."

Misunderstandings or inadequate knowledge about teaching techniques can cause teachers to swing to extremes. In stressing writing, for instance, which teachers should do, it is possible to pay too little attention to the basic elements of grammar, punctuation, and spelling unless the teacher is skilled at balanced instruction.

The challenge is to see that the pendulum is in the middle, not at the extremes. Teachers need extensive professional development and time for practice and learning together, to achieve high quality instruction that teaches subject matter skills well. Recent and extensive research which describes how teachers successfully reach this balance shows it can be done.

A public discussion about teaching the basics has been difficult and confusing for many years. It has also been the subject of intense scholarship. We have found valuable the insights of Howard Gardner, professor of psychiatry at Harvard University and winner of the University of Louisville's Grawmeyer Award:

> Both educational leaders and members of the wider community have often called for a re-emphasis on the basic skills. In large measure, this goal has been invoked in a defensive way. In apparent distinction to the students of earlier eras, our graduates are not able to read, write, or calculate with

proficiency, so they cannot hold jobs, let alone be productive citizens in a community.

> To declare oneself against the institution of the three Rs in the schools is like being against motherhood or the flag. Beyond question, students ought to be literate and ought to revel in their literacy. Yet the essential emptiness of this goal is dramatized by the fact that young children in the United States are becoming literate in a *literal* sense; that is, they are mastering the rules of reading and writing, even as they are learning their addition and multiplication tables. What is missing are not the decoding skills, but two other facets: the capacity to read for understanding and the desire to read at all . . . it is not the mechanics of writing nor the algorithms for subtraction that are absent, but rather the knowledge about when to invoke these skills and the inclination to do so productively in one's own daily life.
>
> To attain basic skills requires drill and discipline. Yet the imposition of a strict regime clearly does not suffice . . .
>
> Indeed, the pursuit of basic skills may sometimes be counterproductive. In the effort to make sure that students "cover" the curriculum and are prepared for various milestones and tests, teachers may inadvertently be undermining more crucial educational goals (Gardner, 1991).

Gardner's observations underscore just how big the challenge is for Kentucky's primary school teachers. To meet this challenge, teachers need, in addition to time and professional development, understanding about what the KIRIS assessment data for their schools tells them about their own instruction and curriculum. Teachers need training and information to learn from test results so they can adjust instruction. Because this need is so important, we have addressed it several places elsewhere in this report. This task force has also convened an assessment forum to make recommendations regarding KIRIS and how to ensure a positive impact on teaching by accountability standards.

Appendix I
Recommendations from
The Implementation of the Kentucky's Primary Program
Institute on Education Reform
University of Kentucky

• Elementary schools should assess the variation in implementation of primary program components from classroom to classroom and design strategies to support the development of key program components not being implemented. Within each school the experience and expertise of teachers who are achieving success should be a primary source of professional development for other teachers.

• Elementary schools should examine their curricula for alignment with Kentucky's Learning Goals and Academic Expectations. Professional development activities should be planned to ensure that learning activities in all classrooms support the expectations and standards for which schools are held accountable.

• Elementary schools, with assistance from their own district, the Department of Education, and Kentucky institutions of higher education, should plan for focused professional development in key areas:

a. Integrating the curriculum:
- focused on Kentucky's Learning Goals.
- using broad-based themes and units.
- increasing the time and quality of science and social studies instruction.
- including instruction in the arts.

b. Building teachers' repertoires of instructional strategies to address students' varied learning styles and needs.

c. Involving students in planning and assessing their own learning.

d. Using a variety of authentic assessment measures.

• The Kentucky Department of Education in cooperation with local school districts should identify classrooms where teachers are using the most promising practices related to the key components of the primary program and establish them as sites for other teachers to visit. Teachers with success in implementing the primary program should be utilized more effectively in professional development activities. (The Kentucky Education Association's "Teachers to the Power of Two" program is one excellent model.)

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